

Department of Human Services

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Articles in Today's Clips Wednesday, March 12, 2008

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KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Human Services stats improve but could be better

Wednesday, March 12, 2008

Michigan Department of Human Services caseworkers are overworked and overloaded.

Because of that, the rate of errors they make is unacceptably high, according to an audit of the department by state Auditor General Thomas McTavish. Results of the audit were released last week.

And the DHS is slow, too -- ranking Michigan 45th because of the glacial pace at which it approves clients for services.

What's more, because DHS approvals take so long, the state is missing out on a \$1 million federal incentive that goes to the top-ranked six states, Gongwer News Service reported recently.

Yet, despite all that and years of budget cuts, performance is improving, according to the audit.

We acknowledge that caseworkers are in a no-win situation.

The audit, which covers October 2002 to November 2006, says that DHS caseworkers mistakenly approved benefits in 7.5 percent of cases in 2005-06. They were rushing to meet the federal requirement that approvals be made within 30 days. Only 81 percent of approvals in Michigan are made within 30 days. In Massachusetts, the top-rated state, 99 percent of approvals meet the 30-day federal requirement.

It's not as if the state of Michigan hasn't been trying to improve its welfare services performance.

Between 1995 and 2002, the federal government applied \$89 million in sanctions against Michigan. "Mispayment rates" soared to nearly 18 percent in the 1997-98 and 1998-99 fiscal years.

The auditor general's interviews with caseworkers revealed they feel they are overburdened. Two-thirds of the caseworkers interviewed and 87 percent of office managers "believe that the caseworkers' caseloads are too high and that the caseworkers find it difficult to accomplish all of their job responsibilities." In addition, caseworkers who were surveyed reported that, on average, 31 percent of their time is spent entering data and preparing applications for the initial eligibility determination and subsequent redeterminations, the report said.

The auditor general suggested an analysis of caseworkers' job functions to determine which tasks can be reassigned to other offices, and better use technology to streamline the process.

We agree that, in this time of severe budget restrictions, it's unrealistic for DHS to receive funding to staff it at higher levels.

But the irony is that the worse Michigan's economy, the more people apply for public assistance but, at the same time, the state has fewer resources to keep up with the increased demand.

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ourMidland.com
from the Midland Daily News

03/11/2008

Our View: DHS mispayments need serious attention

Indeed, we find it alarming but sadly not very surprising that the state Department of Human Services is doling out millions of dollars in misspent aid in its food assistance, child care and Medicaid programs.

The AP reported a recent state audit concluded the DHS was "moderately effective" in its oversight of determining who is eligible for public assistance programs, including the Family Independence Program, Food Assistance Program, Child Development Care (CDC) program and Medical Assistance (MA) Program.

A closer look at the audit, which can be viewed online at <http://audgen.michigan.gov/>, finds the department "was not effective" in its efforts to find and correct errors regarding client eligibility for its programs.

In a state mired in debt, we cannot afford to misspend millions of dollars.

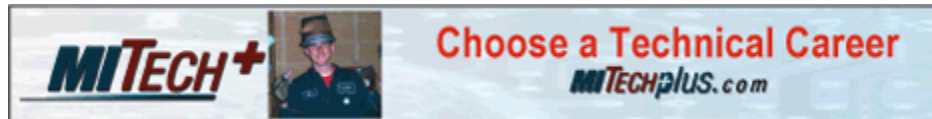
So, how can this be fixed?

The auditor recommends the DHS analyze its caseworkers' workloads and expedite its application process to meet federal standards.

Nearly 90 percent of local DHS offices reported low staffing levels and high caseloads were a factor in mispayment rates. This, too, is not surprising. If we're spending millions in mispayments, why not hire extra workers to find and correct these errors and ultimately save the state money?

To add salt to the wound, because federal law demands the DHS to annually identify all programs and activities susceptible to significant improper payments, federal funding might be in jeopardy and future sanctions pending.

This whole mess needs fixing.



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'Isolated' Calista Springer slept without sheets, blankets or pillows

Posted by [Rex Hall Jr. | Kalamazoo Gazette](#)

March 12, 2008 06:58AM

CENTREVILLE -- Calista Springer slept her last night in a T-shirt and thin sweatpants, chained to a bed with no sheets, blankets or pillows, a Michigan State Police trooper testified Tuesday.

The new details emerged during a court hearing to assess whether Anthony and Marsha Springer should get custody of their two other daughters following Calista's death in a Feb. 27 house fire.



Calista Springer in her sixth-grade yearbook picture.

The hearing provided a new glimpse into Calista's life as police continue to investigate the fire and the circumstances that led the Springers to chain Calista to her bed. Anthony Springer has said the confinement was for Calista's safety because she was a "special-needs" child prone to wandering at night.

Trooper Trever Slater, who assisted fire investigators on the scene, testified he saw Calista's body in the bed with a dog choke collar around her waist that was secured to the bed rail with a plastic tie.

"I don't believe a person could actually break free of that on their own power," Slater said.

At the conclusion of the hearing in St. Joseph County Probate Court, referee Terry Evans ordered that Calista's sisters, ages 12 and 14, remain in the temporary custody of relatives. Anthony and Marsha Springer are scheduled to be back in court for further proceedings on March 20 before Probate Judge Thomas Shumaker.

The proceedings will ultimately determine the placement of Calista's sisters, which could range from returning them to their parents to terminating the Springers' parental rights.

The order entered Tuesday said reuniting the girls with their parents is the goal of the Michigan Department of Human Services "at the present time."

The purpose of the hearing was to determine custody of the sisters, but the testimony revolved around Calista and how she was treated.

Read more

Here are some recent Gazette stories about Calista Springer:

[Authorities told in 2004 Calista Springer was chained to bed -- March 7, 2008](#)

[Documents reveal troubled family life -- March 4, 2008](#)

[Two probes reviewing state's actions -- March 4, 2008](#)

[Centreville says](#)

The "abuse and neglect" petition filed by the county prosecutor's office alleged the Springers had "a long history" of confining Calista to her bed and that they "had a pattern of isolating Calista from those who made reports" to child-welfare workers.

[goodbye](#) -- March 3, 2008

After the hearing, Chief Assistant Prosecutor Chuck Herman would not say specifically how long Calista's parents confined her to her bed other than to state it was going on for "several years or more" before her death.

[Tragic death saddens](#)

[Centreville](#) -- March 1, 2008

[Details emerge in fatal fire](#) -- Feb. 29, 2008

The Kalamazoo Gazette reported last week that a county sheriff's deputy contacted DHS in October 2004 after he received information that Calista's parents were tying her to a bed using a Velcro strap and a dog chain. DHS declined to say what action the agency took.

[Girl who died in Centreville fire was confined to her bed](#) -- Feb. 29, 2008

"When you secure a child to a bed that isn't able to get out, you better have a safety plan," Herman said in court Tuesday. "Apparently there was not. Something's rotten in Denmark."

Some of Tuesday's testimony revealed that Calista was treated differently than her two sisters.

For example, while her bed was devoid of comforts such as blankets, Slater testified Calista's sisters' beds were outfitted with sheets, comforters and pillows.

Annegret Remmert, a social-services specialist with DHS, testified Tuesday that the child-welfare agency began providing services to the Springers in 1995 because Calista and one of her sisters had high levels of lead in their blood. Since then, Remmert said DHS has offered counseling, money, transportation to doctors' appointments and "assessments" of Calista, among other things.

Anthony Springer has said his family had four to five prior contacts with child-welfare workers, but that his children have never been removed from the home. He also has acknowledged that the family turned down assistance from the agency in the past.

Anthony and Marsha Springer attended Tuesday's hearing but they did not speak.

Anthony Springer's attorney, Michael Mestelle, of Sturgis, and Marsha Springer's attorney, Kevin Kleidon, of Centreville, declined to comment for this story.

Slater said Tuesday the cause of the fire is undetermined. However, he said police believe the blaze started near a vacuum cleaner Marsha Springer said she was using just prior to the blaze. Police have no evidence the fire was intentionally set



Teen missing, possibly still nearby

Wednesday, March 12, 2008

THE SAGINAW NEWS

A missing 13-year-old girl has police scrambling to find her.

Ciara Marie Reed ran away from her Creekwood home in the Southfield Village Subdivision in Bridgeport Township at

7 a.m. March 5, township police say.

Police say she is black, stands 5 feet 4 inches, weighs 110 pounds with shoulder-length black hair, has brown eyes and has a lighter complexion.

She was last seen wearing Betty Boop pajama bottoms and a black hooded sweatshirt with Nike tennis shoes.

Her parents do not know where she is, but they told police they suspect she is somewhere in Saginaw living with adults.

Police ask anyone who has seen her to call them at 777-2800 or call 911. v

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Published March 12, 2008

Teen charged in sex assault at Brighton day care

Morning update

Lisa Roose-Church
Special to the State Journal

The Livingston County prosecutor's office is seeking to have a 16-year-old male tried as an adult on charges he molested two girls, ages 4 and 8, cared for at his mother's in-home day care in Brighton.

A hearing to determine if Dakota Whitley should be tried as an adult was set for Thursday before Livingston County Circuit Judge David Reader, but it has been adjourned to March 28 because the assistant prosecutor handling the case is not available this week.

The teen is charged with two counts of first-degree criminal sexual conduct, which is punishable by up to life in prison as an adult; five counts of second-degree criminal sexual conduct; and one count of accosting a minor for immoral purposes.

Prosecutor David Morse said he is seeking to try the teen as an adult because of the serious nature of the charges and because the teen is months shy of turning 17, the legal age to charge a person with a crime as an adult.

Police allege Whitley molested two girls, ages 4 and 8, in the past year at the in-home day care in the 900 block of Fairway Trails in the city of Brighton.

Brighton Police Chief Tom Wightman said the day care was licensed but is no longer in operation.

Morse said his office initially charged the teen Feb. 28 with one count of criminal sexual conduct, but additional charges were added on March 5 after subsequent review of interviews with the victims.

Morse said police continue to investigate whether any other children at the day care were victimized. Details on how many children attended the daycare was not known Tuesday.

If the teen is tried and convicted as an adult, the court would have the option of sentencing him as an adult, a juvenile or a combination of both.

A message left for the teen's attorney, Stephen LaCommare Jr., was not immediately returned Tuesday.

Contact Livingston Daily Press & Argus reporter Lisa Roose-Church at (517) 552-2846 or at lrchurch@gannett.com.



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Published March 12, 2008

Lansing sex offender sentenced to 120 years in prison

Lansing State Journal

A Lansing man who authorities said created movies of himself sexually assaulting a young girl, will spend the rest of his life in prison, federal officials said.

Michael Hinojosa, 33, was sentenced Monday to 120 years in federal prison, said Gregory Palmore, spokesman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Hinojosa was convicted last year of six counts - including sexually exploiting a minor and distributing images of a minor engaging in sexually explicit conduct. There is no parole in the federal prison system.

The federal agency began its investigation in March 2006, and investigators were led to Hinojosa's Seymour Street apartment. Agents found photographs and video of Hinojosa engaging in sex acts with the girl, court documents say.

Hinojosa distributed some of the images on the Internet, authorities said. Also found in Hinojosa's possession were more than 600 images of children, primarily prepubescent girls, engaged in sexually explicit conduct.

Judge Paul Maloney, who presided over the two-day bench trial in U.S. District Court in Kalamazoo, called the images of bondage and sadomasochism the most disturbing he had ever seen, Palmore said.

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March 12, 2008

Rape charges dropped against father West Bloomfield

Autistic girl, 15, would not testify, prosecutors say

BY JOHN WISELY and BRIAN DICKERSON
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

The criminal case against a West Bloomfield man accused of raping his autistic daughter ended Tuesday when a judge granted a prosecution request to dismiss all charges.

The man, who spent 80 days in jail before prosecutors agreed to release him on bond, declined to comment after the dismissal but smiled broadly as he left the courtroom with his wife. She faced child abuse charges related to not stopping the alleged rapes, but prosecutors dropped her case, too, saying the girl refused to testify.

The Free Press has not named the couple to protect the identity of the girl.

"What they have is a case that doesn't exist," the man's lawyer, Jerome Sabbota, said Tuesday.

The case was controversial from its beginning because the 15-year-old girl, who cannot speak, made the claims through facilitated communication, a widely discredited method of communication in which a teaching aide helps such students type words into a keyboard. Experts testified that scientific evaluations of the method have proven that the teaching aide, consciously or unconsciously, authors the messages. .

Oakland County Assistant Prosecutors Paul Walton and Barbara Morrison defended their decision to press the case until it became clear the girl would not testify.

"We wanted to make sure we were giving her the same kind of opportunity to have her voice heard in court as every other kid," Morrison said.

"We're never going to feel good about this case," Walton said. "Have we sent a child back to a potentially dangerous situation?"

But when the girl was reunited with her parents Tuesday afternoon after almost four months in foster care, she ran into her father's arms, said Deborah Tyner, who represented the girl's mother.

"She couldn't stop hugging her father," Tyner said. "That's not fear."

Defense attorneys insisted the rape claims were nonsense because the girl couldn't communicate independently. Over two days of hearings in January, the girl failed to answer questions correctly when asked out of earshot of her facilitator. Prosecutors noted the parents strongly advocated facilitated communication before the rape claims were made.

Walton and Morrison said they met with the girl four times since the January hearings. In one interview she pointed to yes-no cards to indicate she was reluctant to return to court. In another interview, the girl indicated through her facilitator, Cindy Scarsella, that she was afraid to testify against her father, they said.

Morrison and Walton said they questioned the girl while Scarsella wore headphones and the girl typed coherent answers with Scarsella's help.

"She typed: 'I know I have to talk, but I'm afraid,' " Morrison said. She said the interview was not videotaped and that there was no written record of the exchanges between the girl and the prosecutors.

Sabbota said there were additional problems with the case, including the girl's intact hymen, which would preclude repeated rapes.

A prosecution expert who worked with the girl for years testified that the girl's communication was unreliable.

At one point, the girl claimed her parents visited her at the home of her rabbi, where she stayed before entering foster care. The rabbi adamantly denied the visit took place.

At another point, the girl claimed she feared her father because he kept guns in the home, but a police search found no weapons.

"When you have red flags, you have a duty to investigate," Sabbota said.

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Wednesday, March 12, 2008

Charges dropped against autistic girl's parents

Couple, kids to reunite; sex, abuse case dismissed because teen won't testify.

Mike Martindale / The Detroit News

BLOOMFIELD TOWNSHIP -- A West Bloomfield Township couple will be reunited with their teenaged children after allegations of sexual assault and child abuse were dismissed on Tuesday.

The couple, not named to protect the identity of their 15-year-old autistic daughter, faced criminal charges after the girl accused her father of sexual assault and her mother of second-degree child abuse and witness intimidation for failing to report the attacks.

"These charges should never have been made and once they were, dropped immediately," said Jerome Sabotta, the father's attorney.

The girl made allegations in late November 2007 to a teacher's aide at the Walled Lake high school where she is a ninth-grade special education student, which resulted in both the girl and her 13-year-old brother being removed from the home and their parents jailed. The mother was released on bond but the father was held for several weeks.

Charges were dropped Tuesday by Bloomfield 48th District Judge Marc Barron at the request of Oakland County Prosecutor David Gorcyca, who said the girl was too afraid to testify against her father. Gorcyca said the brother also refused to testify.

"It's extremely heartbreaking," said Assistant Prosecutor Paul Walton. "We took every means possible to give her a voice in court but in the end she has indicated she is afraid to testify."

A civil case to terminate parental custody was dismissed Monday, also because the prosecutor could not go forward without the girl's cooperation.

"Obviously the prosecutor wanted this dismissed because it couldn't be proven," Sabotta said. "There is no evidence to corroborate the initial accusations. And there's no evidence because there's no case. It didn't happen."

Sabotta said all the charges made were based on facilitated communication, a controversial method where a person who can't otherwise communicate "speaks" by typing on a computer keyboard with another person supporting the arms and fingers.

Sabotta said defense experts tested the girl before Barron and the girl was unable to answer a single question.

"The facilitator authored any of her (girl's) earlier communications or allegations," Sabotta said. "It's not credible. It's unreliable."

You can reach Mike Martindale at (248) 647-7226 or mmartindale@detnews.com.

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OAKLAND COUNTY

2nd boy gives details in teacher sex-assault trial

Account differs from other child's

BY L.L. BRASIER • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • March 12, 2008

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The second child to accuse former Oak Park school teacher James Perry of sexual assault took the witness stand Tuesday, and for the first time, provided details of how he says Perry got him into an empty special-education classroom.

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The child, who was 4 at the time of the alleged assaults in 2005, had not been able to tell investigators how Perry, a kindergarten teacher at Key Elementary, got him into the room.

But the boy, now 7, provided many new details, saying Perry took him and a second child from a cafeteria and offered them both treats. He said Perry pulled them by their shirts and directed them down a hallway to the special-education room, where he was assaulted as the second child waited outside the door. The second child, the boy said, was then taken into the room and assaulted.

"Are you telling the truth?" Oakland County Assistant Prosecutor Andrea Dean asked him.

"Yes," the child said.

Perry, 34, of Ferndale is accused of four counts of criminal sexual assault on the two boys, who were 4- and 5-year-old kindergartners. The boys were not his students. They have given varying accounts in court and to investigators. Monday, the other boy, now 8, testified that he had been pulled out of a lunch line in a hallway by Perry and denied the other boy was with him.

On Tuesday, defense attorney Mitchell Ribitwer asked the 7-year-old why he didn't report the assault to his parents or forensic interviewers who questioned him two weeks after the alleged assault.

"I thought they wouldn't believe me," he said.

The boy eventually made a statement, his mother testified Tuesday, after she and the other boy's mother questioned them four months later. She said the boy told of oral sex. But the boy, in his testimony, said he told his mother only of fondling, and that it wasn't until Dean questioned him that he told of oral sex.

Also Tuesday, Kimberly Pugh, a cafeteria worker, testified that she saw Perry take a boy out of the cafeteria at lunchtime on two occasions.

This is Perry's second trial. Judge Denise Langford Morris threw out his second conviction in early 2007 after learning that police failed to interview the three adults assigned to the special-ed room, all of whom say that the room would have been occupied at the time of the alleged attacks.



Wednesday, March 12, 2008

Detroit 911 operator gets one-year probation

She avoids jail for failing to send help to a boy who called to say his mother was dying.

Doug Guthrie / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- Surrounded by supporters, a 911 emergency operator believed to be the first operator in the nation convicted of neglect of duty escaped jail time Tuesday for failing to send help to a 5-year-old boy who called to say his mother was dying. Sharon Nichols, 43, thought Robert Turner's call on Feb. 20, 2006, was a prank. But police discovered his mother, Sherill Turner, 46, dead inside her Detroit apartment from an apparent heart attack when a second 911 operator sent officers to chastise the boy because he called again three hours later.

She faced a year in jail for the misdemeanor, but 36th District Judge Paula G. Humphries on Tuesday said she agreed with a presentence report and prosecutors' recommendations of no time behind bars.

She ordered Nichols to serve one year of probation and 15 days or 100 hours of community service and pay \$450 in fines and court costs. The judge also canceled routine drug counseling and testing because there's no evidence of abuse.

"But for this one conviction this is your only criminal record and in fact not even a traffic ticket on her record," the judge said.

Shortly before the jury found Nichols guilty on Jan. 18, the judge dismissed identical charges against the second 911 operator to speak with the boy on the day his mother died. Humphries noted that rudeness does not equate to neglect of duty in determining operator Terri Sutton's case. She may have sent police to the house to punish the boy for playing on the phone, but at least she sent help, the judge said.

"The sentence was fair," said Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Lora Weingarden. "Some members of the community probably wanted her to go to jail for up to a year. But Ms. Nichols was fired from her job, and when she is not serving as a 911 operator, she's not a problem."

Robert Turner, now 7 and a third-grader living with his 24-year-old sister in Albion, testified at the trial that Nichols hung up on him. The boy and his family didn't attend Tuesday's sentencing.

The courtroom was packed with Nichols' friends, co-workers, members of her church and an officer from the 911 operators union, the American Federation of State and Municipal Employees.

Albert Garrett, president of AFSME Council 25, said in a letter read aloud by the judge that neglect of duty was meant to punish misbehavior by elected officials and sworn police officers. In urging the judge to go easy on Nichols, Garrett said the city's 911 system is understaffed, overworked and poorly equipped.

Nichols said she made a quick judgment about the call while working on 4 1/2 hours of sleep the day after working a double shift.

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KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Power shutoff settlement could help the needy, elderly

Wednesday, March 12, 2008

BY SARITA CHOUREY

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388-8575

VICKSBURG -- Hundreds of needy families and elderly people could benefit from a pending settlement between the state of Michigan and the power company that shut off the electricity to the home of a 90-year-old Vicksburg woman, who died of hypothermia in December.

Indiana Michigan Power has agreed to pay \$127,250, to be split equally between the South County Community Services and the local Area Agency on Aging, under a proposed settlement before the Michigan Public Service Commission.

The social service agencies will use the money to help needy residents with basic living expenses, including their energy bills.

"I am never speechless, and I am speechless," Mary Howard, director of South County Community Services, said of the settlement Tuesday.

The nonprofit group's budget for utility and housing assistance last year was \$13,000. It provided relief to 331 households, she said.

"Now, I would know what it's like to win the lottery," Howard said.

The power company is offering to pay the money rather face a fine of \$11,100, company spokesman David Mayne said.

Asked why the company agreed to pay so much more money to the social-service organizations, Mayne pointed to the settlement agreement, which says, "These agencies are best equipped to make sure that assistance is there when it is needed, and that money will go to a better use than would payment of a fine."

The sum represents \$1 per customer, according to the agreement, which was filed Friday with the commission. The settlement also states that it is not an admission of liability by the company.

The three-member commission is not expected to rule on the settlement until next month, Mayne said. But, he added, "I guess you could say that's a formality."

The company had acknowledged it failed to properly contact Phyllis Willett before shutting off her power Dec. 13. She was found by a social worker four days later and died of hypothermia on Dec. 21.

"The sentiment is (that) certainly we concede there were some failings in our own process," Mayne said. "Therefore, we feel like this settlement seems appropriate."

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Wednesday, March 12, 2008

State eyes twice-monthly food stamp distribution

Balancing payments would give shoppers more access to fresh food, proponents say.

David Eggert / Associated Press

LANSING -- Michigan could become the first state in the nation to issue food stamps twice a month, making fresh produce and meat more available and giving grocery workers steadier hours.

The state's 1.2 million food stamp recipients -- the highest number ever -- now have their benefits added to a debit card within the first 10 days of the month. They then spend those dollars early in the month, typically in poorer, urban areas where residents may have limited transportation.

Each recipient gets an average \$88 a month.

Retailers say the once-a-month assistance is spent early and usually all at once, causing them problems with staffing, cash flow and inventory. Advocates for the poor say food stamp recipients aren't buying enough healthy, fresh food throughout the month. Legislation that would require the state to issue food stamp benefits two times a month may be approved by the state Senate this week. A similar measure sponsored by Democratic Rep. Andy Meisner of Ferndale is pending in the House. Recipients who get lower amounts of assistance would still get their payments just once a month.

"I'm trying to help people help themselves," said bill sponsor Martha Scott, a Democratic senator from Highland Park. "I see people buying so much stuff the first of the month. You want to help people balance things out."

Distributing food stamps twice monthly would give shoppers more flexibility and encourage them to buy fresher foods at least twice a month, she said.

While the legislation has backing from groceries and unionized workers, not everyone thinks more frequent payments are the solution. They wonder if the problem could be fixed instead by extending the period in which money is added to debit cards from 10 days to 20 days, which would spread out the days food stamp recipients shop.

The state Department of Human Services is surveying food stamp recipients to find out their preference and how a switch would affect them. Results should be ready for lawmakers in April.

DHS spokeswoman Maureen Sorbet said the agency is prepared to go to twice-monthly payments or a longer period of payments depending on survey results, legislative developments and getting approval from the federal government, which pays for food stamps. A farm bill being negotiated in Congress could prove a stumbling block, since it includes a provision that would ban states from changing food stamp distribution from once a month.

Terri Stangl, executive director of the Saginaw-based Center for Civil Justice, credited the state for conducting the survey. Some recipients have limited transportation and prefer using their money to buy in bulk for better purchasing power, she said.

"I'm not convinced that with the amount of money they're getting, they're going to buy more fresh food," Stangl said.

Scott, however, argued that issuing benefits once a month but extending the period in which they are handed out would help grocers and their employees, but not recipients.

Chris Michalakakis, lobbyist for the 50,000 Michigan members of the United Food and Commercial Workers union, said grocery employees are pushed to work extra hard in the first 10 days of the month, then see their hours cut for the rest of the month. By distributing food stamps more equally over the month, he said, "workers will see a more even distribution of hours, as well as a greater availability of hours."

The legislative debate comes at a time when 12 percent, or more than one in nine, Michigan residents get food stamps. Eighty percent of benefits go to households with children. The number of food stamp recipients in Michigan has doubled in six years, most likely because of the weak economy.

The real issue that needs to be addressed, Stangl said, is that food stamp households are able to buy less food because assistance has been eroding each year. The federal food stamp program assumes families have enough of their own money plus food stamps to spend \$1.05 per person per meal -- not enough for a healthy diet at today's prices, she said.

Although the federal farm bill would boost money for food stamps, the price of fresh fruits, vegetables and leaner meats is rising faster than processed foods, making it harder for families to buy the healthier items, she said.

The food stamp bills are House Bill 4923 and Senate Bill 120.

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Article published Mar 12, 2008

EDITORIAL

Stretching dollars Distribute food stamps twice a month

Ideally, we all should budget our money precisely over the course of a month so that we have the funds available to pay bills as they come due. It shouldn't matter if we get paid weekly, every two weeks or monthly.

In reality, most of us tend to spend more when we first get our paychecks, with the budget belt tightening as the pay period progresses.

People who receive public assistance such as food stamps are no different. Families tend to use more food stamps when they first get them, simply because their immediate hunger overshadows the need for longer-range budgeting. With benefits doled out during the first 10 days of the month, many food-stamp recipients often find themselves scraping by toward the end of the month.

Their spending habits also have an impact on retailers, who see greater traffic at the beginning of the month, as well as charitable organizations such as soup kitchens, which often see demand grow toward the end of the month.

Now some Michigan lawmakers are seeking to even out the spending roller-coaster by distributing food stamps twice a month, rather than monthly.

We think it is a good idea. Not only would recipients be able to budget their food spending better, but it also would make it easier for them to buy fresh produce and meat throughout the month, benefitting the health of their families.

In addition, stores would be able to stock their inventory and schedule their staffs more regularly, rather than trying to anticipate a first-of-the-month rush and a slowdown at the end of the month. Likewise, soup kitchens and food pantries wouldn't be as likely to see big fluctuations in demand.

Because food-stamp benefits now are transferred electronically on to recipients' debit cards, the cost of distributing funds twice a month instead of monthly would be minimal for state government.

More than 1.2 million people in Michigan - or about one in every nine - receives food stamps. That is more than double the number of people receiving assistance in 2000. Eighty percent of the benefits go to households with children. The state Department of Human Services currently is surveying recipients to see how a change to twice-a-month payments would affect them.

Thus far, we have yet to hear any persuasive argument against changing the current system. Unless a good case can be made to retain the monthly payment system, we think Michigan should become the first in the nation to provide food stamps twice a month.

Man who stole from shelter gets 30 days

GAYLORD -- A Gaylord man was sentenced to 30 days in jail for stealing from a homeless shelter for which he served as a board member.

Jetre Archie Ormsbee, 54, was sentenced on a reduced misdemeanor embezzlement charge for the theft of \$700 from the Friendship Shelter. He pleaded guilty to a lesser charge of embezzlement under \$200 as part of a plea bargain, said Otsego County Prosecutor Kyle Legel.

Ormsbee was investigated by Michigan State Police and charged after not turning over proceeds from the sale of several old vehicles no longer used at the shelter. He made restitution after being interviewed by police.

Chief Judge Patricia Morse, of the 46th Circuit Trial Court, sentenced Ormsbee to jail and ordered him to resign from the homeless shelter's board of directors. He will participate in the jail's new work camp program, Legel said.

Detroit Free Press

March 12, 2008

Homeless shelter opens day care to the public

The Coalition on Temporary Shelter has opened its Bright Beginnings infant day care center to the public.

Bright Beginnings, the only homeless care facility in Michigan that has certified infant day care, opened in September and now, based on available space, welcomes infants and children up to 2 1/2 years old.

For information, call Barbara DeBarge infant/toddler director, at 313-832-4028.

Funding is crucial for the needy, groups say DETROIT BLOCK GRANTS

Residency rule criticized

BY CECIL ANGEL and ZACHARY GORCHOW • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS • March 12, 2008

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The telephone call to Chad Audi on Tuesday was the kind of fallout that some Detroit nonprofits feared might happen.

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The man, a suburbanite who gives \$5,000 a year to Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries, was upset about a city ordinance that effectively deemed 105 nonprofit groups ineligible for receiving federal Community Development Block Grant allocations because their boards were not made up of at least 51% Detroit residents.

Councilwoman Barbara-Rose Collins said that allowing suburbanites to be the majority was a "slave-master mentality."

Audi, who is president of the Rescue Mission, said the man told him: "Please take my name off your mailing list if this is how people in Detroit are viewing us."

On Monday, the nonprofits received e-mail that they would no longer be receiving the block grant allocations through the City of Detroit.

On Tuesday, representatives from several of the organizations gathered at a news conference at Gleaners Food Bank of Southeastern Michigan on the city's east side. They stressed their contributions to the city and warned that needy people could be hurt if they lose funding.

"This has already cost organizations," said Cheryl P. Johnson, chief executive officer for the Coalition On Temporary Shelter, which stands to lose \$138,540.

She said the ordinance contradicts all the talk of regionalism and "us working together."

The groups stressed that their board members are volunteers and are not paid.

"It's quite the opposite," said Daniel Varner, chief executive officer of Think Detroit Police Athletic League. "They're giving us money to serve city kids."

The council approved the new rules unanimously in July.

Councilwoman Sheila Cockrel, who on Monday called the situation an outrage and to the best of her memory recalled voting against the new rule, owned up to actually voting in favor of the measure. She said she must not have realized what the issue was when she voted for it, adding that the council took up a host of major issues that day.

"I missed it," said Cockrel, who did not attend the news conference. "I'm responsible for my votes."

She said there is some discussion among council members about trying to find a way to get the groups their funding outside of the block grant process as a stopgap measure -- if officials at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development approve.

Many Detroiters are offering to help.

"We're getting calls from residents in the city saying 'We want to be on your board,' " said Gerald Brisson, Gleaners vice president of development.

For one organization that was declared ineligible, the news may turn out to be good.

Tony Spearman-Leach, spokesman for the Charles H. Wright Museum, said it was ruled ineligible. An internal audit found that 14 of 20 board members are Detroit residents. The museum plans an appeal.

Agostinho Fernandes, president of Gleaners, said it's not about 51% of the board, "it's about the 100% of folks who live in poverty."

Contact **CECIL ANGEL** at 313-223-4531 or angel@freepress.com.

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March 12, 2008

Council must act to protect aid to poor

Residency rules for the boards of nonprofits serving Detroit are not an unreasonable idea if the agencies get public funds. But rules that have the effect of making the nonprofits that serve Detroit's poorest residents ineligible for millions of dollars of Community Development Block Grants are not acceptable.

The City Council has to put the people first and make sure these agencies that provide vital assistance to one of the nation's poorest big cities continue to get federal funding.

The stakes are too high for the 200,000 Detroiters living in poverty, including 15,000 homeless. Under new city residency rules for nonprofits serving Detroit residents, more than 100 agencies would be ineligible for federal grants received through the city because the majority of their board members do not live in Detroit. The reality, however, is that it's not easy to get people to serve on these boards, and members who happen to live outside the city are often instrumental in raising funds from nongovernment sources.

Fixing this problem won't be easy. But the city has to at least ask the Department of Housing and Urban Development for a one-year waiver to give nonprofits enough time to recruit people for their boards or grant temporary waivers to individual agencies.

The affected nonprofits include some of the city's top service providers, such as Focus: HOPE, Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries, Wolverine Human Services, Goodwill Industries, SER Metro Detroit and the Legal Aid and Defender Association.

The council, when it acted in July, could have avoided this trouble by being more diligent about what was at stake and how the organizations function. Now City Council must protect the federal funding -- or Detroit's most vulnerable residents will pay a price .

March 12, 2008

FROM OUR READERS

Where board members live should not matter for charitable groups helping city

I was stunned as I read your March 11 article "City residency rule could cost millions for charities." I didn't know that our hundreds of hours of volunteer work for Detroit as nonresidents aren't appreciated by the Detroit City Council.

I have volunteered numerous hours to most of the Detroit organizations listed in your article and many more east-area nonprofits not listed. All are worthy.

I and my husband were raised in Detroit. We felt forced to leave due to crime and school issues. Our hearts never left the city. We stayed involved. Our kids are grown and we are now back in the city.

I find it disrespectful in the extreme to assume nonresidents, and seemingly whites, don't have a stake in a revitalized Detroit. Is this reverse racism?

Susan Mikulak

Detroit

The people ill-served

To deny thousands of people in Detroit services because a majority of members of the board of directors of a nonprofit organization do not live in the city is mind-blowing. Are the managers of those organizations also affected by this edict?

The city is millions in debt, the auto industry has terminated thousands, and now people will lose even more because the City Council appears to not have a clue. Why in the world should a member of a board of direc-

"With all the daunting problems the city faces, why would the council create more hardship on the citizens who elected them to serve?"

DICK ISHAM, Farmington Hills

tors of any agency have to live in Detroit? Finding good board members who will take an interest in any organization is not an easy task and should not be limited to a geographic area, especially when the agency serves the entire southeastern Michigan area.

With all the daunting problems the city faces, why on Earth would the council create more hardship on the citizens who elected them to serve?

Dick Isham

Farmington Hills

Move to the city

Although the City of Detroit is surrounded by controversy, this may be a golden opportunity for change! We would like to extend an invitation to non-Detroit residents to move into the city. The reality is, what happens in Detroit affects all of us in southeast Michigan. If you don't live here, however, you can't vote for change or let your voice be heard.

We are very tired of paying for the mayor's poor ethical judgment and his

immaturity. Detroit needs a responsible, capable mayor. There are already many responsible and capable voters here who want change, but we need more of them.

As residents of Detroit's East English Village neighborhood, we notice many young people moving into the city. They value the diverse lifestyle of city living. In addition to the downtown residential developments, Detroit has many vintage homes with beautiful features. They are incredibly affordable and are often found in stable neighborhoods that offer tax incentives to new owners. Detroit is still a viable city, but any city is only as good as its residents.

We challenge those who want to make a difference to move into the city and make Detroit their home.

Jackie Cayton and Charlie Zink

Detroit

What really counts

Now our Detroit City Council would take away federal funds from nonprofit organizations whose good works benefit the citizens of Detroit? Can't our City Council see that what really counts is not where the members of those boards live, but rather where the citizens they serve live?

Council members would do Detroiters a better service if they concentrated on managing themselves and leave these other better-managed organizations alone.

Christopher Beck

Detroit

Earned income credit big boost for poor taxpayers

Posted by [Chronicle News Service and Local reports](#) March 12, 2008
10:08AM

There's a bit of a silver lining for hundreds of thousands of people in the dark cloud of Michigan's economy: Declining wages for many lower-income workers last year likely make more of them eligible for the federal earned income tax credit.

Last year, 665,000 Michigan residents received \$1.2 billion from the credit, in addition to their regular refund from the 2006 tax year, according to the Internal Revenue Service.

With Michigan's economy still slumping, the IRS says there are probably even more people eligible for the credit this year -- and they may not know it.

"It may not be on taxpayers' radar screen, even though they're making less money," IRS spokesman Luis Garcia said. "The economy is hurting in Michigan and more people may qualify for the credit this year."

Also, people who have earned income but are not required to file a tax return may qualify for the credit.

"Certainly for people who are working and just aren't earning a whole lot, it's a great opportunity to take advantage of," said Heidi Sytsema of Muskegon, a certified personal accountant who has volunteered the last few years as a tax preparer for low-income people.

"The government is making this available because they know it's hard for working people to make it," she said.

Those who have already filed tax returns, but think they might be eligible for the credit can amend their returns by filing Form 1040X, Garcia said. Returns can be amended for the previous three tax years.

The IRS says that non-English speakers, nontraditional families, the homeless and rural residents are among those who may not realize they qualify.

Nationally, the IRS estimates as many as one in four taxpayers who are eligible for the credit don't claim it.

The maximum credit for the 2007 tax year is \$4,716 for a family with two or more children, \$2,853 for a family with one child and \$428 if the taxpayer does not reside with children, according to the IRS.

"It's an incredibly important anti-poverty tool, and it's a critical income supplement at a time low- and moderate-income families in Michigan are struggling mightily to make ends meet," said Sharon Parks, vice president for policy for the Lansing-based Michigan League for Human Services.

Sarah Rinsema-Sybenga, director of Sacred Suds, said people crowded in the building Tuesday to get their taxes prepared free of charge. Sacred Suds is one of several local places where people with low incomes can get taxes done for free.

One woman who is on disability and receives Social Security was in tears because she didn't realize she qualified for tax credits.

"The majority of people who come here are the working poor who qualify for the earned income tax credit. So many people are working a couple of part-time jobs, yet struggling to make ends meet," Rinsema-Sybenga said.

She called the earned income tax credit "a huge economic boost, and it means hope for people who are struggling."

A new state earned-income tax credit that provides eligible filers with 10 percent of the federal credit goes into effect for this tax year.

Taxpayers will be able to claim the credit on their tax returns next year.

The state credit increases to 20 percent of the federal credit in the 2009 tax year.

Michigan Report

March 12, 2008

STATE JOBLESS RATE TOPS NATION **AT 7.1%**

Newly compiled national data show Michigan's January unemployment rate of 7.1 percent was the worst of any state, and significantly higher than other Great Lakes states, even though the rate dropped by .3 percentage points compared to December.

The next highest jobless rates in the Great Lakes were the 5.6 percent mark in Illinois and 5.5 percent in Ohio, whose troubled manufacturing sector was the focus of last week's presidential primary.

The second-highest rate overall was Alaska's 6.5 percent.

Michigan posted the only statistically significant drop in employment compared to January 2007, losing 57,400 jobs. Four states saw employment grow by at least that much: Washington up 66,400 jobs, North Carolina up 81,100 jobs, New York up 84,200 jobs and Texas up 277,200 jobs.

Other rates in the nation's industrial mid-section were 4.9 percent in Wisconsin and 4.5 percent in Minnesota and Indiana.

The national rate stood at 4.9 percent in January.

Of the 31 states with rates below the national average, five reported jobless rates of 3 percent or less: Utah at 3 percent, Nebraska at 2.9 percent, Idaho at 2.8 percent, Wyoming at 2.7 percent and South Dakota at 2.6 percent.

Michigan's standing with the worst rate came even though it showed an improved situation compared to December while 27 states saw increases in their unemployment rates, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported.

Michigan Department of Human Services News Release

Contact: Maureen Sorbet or Colleen Steinman (517) 373-7394

Michigan Child Support Program distributes \$1.4 billion in 2007

March 12, 2008

The Michigan Child Support Program increased the amount collected by more than \$16 million from fiscal year 2006, all while the number of child support workers decreased.

Administered by the Department of Human Services, the Child Support Program distributed about \$1.4 billion in fiscal year 2007. Of that number, \$1.28 billion went directly to Michigan families with over \$37 million in medical support for children. In addition, federal and state governments were reimbursed \$94 million for public assistance provided to families.

Over \$408 million in past-due support was collected and distributed to families – an increase of \$12 million over 2006.

"Looking at the overall collections, the numbers translate to each child support professional being responsible for collecting \$596,760 in 2007," said Marilyn Stephen, director of the Office of Child Support. "Child support professionals – including friends of the court, prosecuting attorneys and DHS child support staff – continue to do an excellent job for Michigan families."

In addition to ensuring that employers withhold court-ordered child support payments from wages and send the money to the state for disbursement to families, other enforcement tools can be used to collect support. These may include:

- Revoking or denying passports for delinquent payers.
- Suspending or denying driver's, professional, or hunting licenses.
- Intercepting federal and state tax refunds.

As a last resort, local courts can take actions including issuance of bench warrants to compel delinquent payers to support their children.

"The child support program continues to make great strides in collecting monies due to families through the use of various enforcement methods,"
DHS

Director Ismael Ahmed said. "Whether parents live together or not, they are both responsible for providing financial support that keeps their children out of poverty and helps them grow into healthy, productive adults."

For more information on the Michigan child support program, go to
www.michigan.gov/childsupport

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